



songs in the night

laurenttalley

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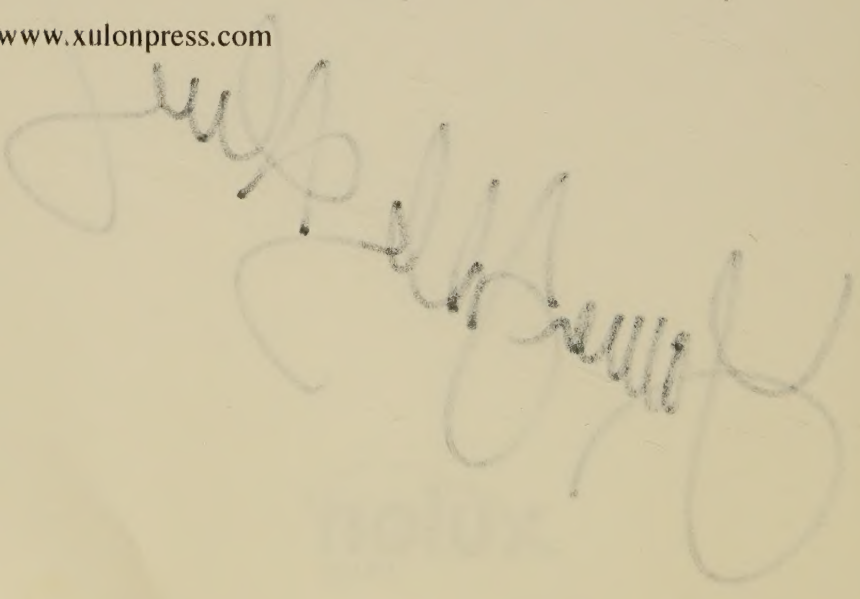
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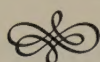
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Introduction



I used to hate journaling; it always felt like somebody was looking over my shoulder. I think I had visions of my eighth grade English teacher and the dreaded “How I Spent My Summer Vacation” essay in my head. I confess that I also used to think journaling was one of those things that artsy, outdoorsy people do. You know, they eat granola and wear Birkenstocks and sit out under the trees writing about nature. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but that’s just not me. I’d rather eat pizza, wear sequins and watch a ball game.

But recently in a very hard time in my life, I discovered how therapeutic journaling really is. When I was stressed and overwhelmed, I took a minute to write everything down and somehow whatever was bothering me didn’t seem so foreboding anymore. Even now I still go back to the computer whenever I have something on my mind.

So I started writing everything that God was showing me down in a notebook. I was learning so much so fast that I couldn’t remember everything if I didn’t keep a journal. I quickly filled two notebooks with scriptural studies, prayers, questions and my everyday thoughts. I even have some leftover to-do lists in there. On one page I have an

extensive study of Philippians...at the top of the page is a scrawled reminder: DON'T FORGET BLACK SHOES!

I believe that God placed the idea in my head and the desire in my heart to turn those journals into a book. Never having written a book before, I had no idea where to start, so I attempted to rewrite my studies into more serious, reverent, "spiritual" sounding material- my idea of what Bible studies were. I read the finished product, and was bored with my own writing.

That's bad.

Who wants another textbook? Nobody I know. I decided to rewrite the studies and journal entries over. I believe that Bible studies certainly are serious and spiritual and should be treated with reverence. However, I seriously doubt God wants us to fall asleep while reading His Word. God has made the Bible come alive to me and I am so excited to share my love of His Word with you.

However, part of me wonders what business I have saying anything about the Bible. The more I learn, the less I feel I actually know. I take comfort in knowing there are people far less knowledgeable writing books about things far less important.

I have learned throughout my life that what people really want and need is a personal connection with God and with each other. I believe that we learn much better from things we identify with and relate to. Thank God He doesn't require us to be perfect in order to share with each other and help each other; in fact, I hope you see my heart here through all my honest questions and the lessons God was patient enough to teach me. I certainly don't claim to be a Biblical scholar or expert. I want you to know that I am in no way above you; I'm still learning just like everybody else. You have here the signposts of the journey that I'm still on, and I hope they comfort you,

teach you and inspire you to dig deeper, go farther and learn more in your walk with God.

So order a pizza, turn on the game, and at halftime, come join me.

How I Got Here



April

I was content and looking forward to the future. I had happy, fulfilling relationships surrounding me, I was healthy, my career was steadily ascending, and I considered myself a pretty good Christian- the kind that fervently believes the truths of the faith in her heart, but only gives God her full attention when she needs or wants something.

(I know you're not like that. But this was me.)

And then everything changed.

May

My heart was broken. Relationships I thought I could count on had disappeared. I felt betrayed, and loneliness was crushing. I was under so much stress that my body simply couldn't handle it all, and I became very ill for several months. I experienced debilitating fatigue, loss of appetite and severe joint and muscle pain. Even my performance as a singer suffered. I found it difficult to even produce

notes because I was so drained. Doctors diagnosed me with adrenal disease and chronic fatigue syndrome.

During this time no one knew how sick I was except my immediate family. I didn't want to complain to everyone that I was tired because, well, aren't we all? I kept it mostly to myself and my family also because I didn't want to answer a lot of questions. Appearances provided no clues about my health except for the occasional inquiry, "You look tired- are you ok?" (I usually replied, "Yes, I'm fine- just tired." Underneath the pleasantries I *really* wanted to scream, "NO, I'm not ok! I'm miserable!")

I was confined to the bed or the couch much of the time. My illness kept me in my bed, and my overwhelming sadness drove me to my Bible. I wasn't angry with God, but I definitely had some questions for Him. I needed to know why these things had happened in my life and how they fit into God's plan for my life. I read the Word for hours every day. It kept me going.

June

I was learning so much so fast. I could not wait to wake up the next day to see what the Lord had for me that day. I just knew that every day held some revelation or breakthrough that God would give me. I began writing down everything God was teaching me in a notebook, and I dated each entry. I wrote my thoughts, prayers, questions and studies in the notebook. During this time God began to change my entire life.

The first lesson He had for me was how to respond to my heartache. He taught me how to deal with hurts by showing me examples in Scripture of others who went through similar distress. A friend of

mine told me that there is healing in hurting. In frustration I retorted that if that was the case then I'd have gotten well already. She lovingly pointed out that we have to allow ourselves to feel pain as well as joy if we're ever going to allow God to teach us anything.

**We have to allow ourselves to feel pain as well
as joy if we're ever going to allow God
to teach us anything.**

That's a difficult thing for many people to do, and I was one of them. Before this experience, I would have buried myself in work and activity and stuffed my feelings down inside. When I understood this, I decided that I was going to allow myself to have a heart. I was willing to cry and hurt as much as necessary to emerge from this experience as a better person. I knew it would all have been for nothing if I didn't grow from it. As hard as it was, I made myself deal with every hurt, frustration and doubt. I cried every tear I had inside, asked God every question and accepted each of His answers, whether they were pleasant to hear or not. Before long I realized that every day hurt a little less.

And then one day, I realized that I had stopped hurting.

July

My physical symptoms began to improve. I regained considerable strength and I felt more like my old self. I had energy again to do the things I loved. (My appetite came back with a vengeance- I had no trouble devouring a large pizza!) My doctor could not understand why my test results were improving without any medication; however, I understood perfectly.

God had breathed new life into me, from the inside out. Not only had He transformed me spiritually, physically I felt as if I was reborn. This didn't happen overnight; it was a gradual process which I believe came to pass as a direct result of my time spent in Bible study and prayer over that summer.

See, what's on the inside of us is reflected outwardly. Our happiness, moods, physical condition and success in life are all connected to our spiritual state. When we ignore our time with God, we will soon start to see the rest of our lives deteriorate. I had heard this truth all my life but this experience in my life made it real. He is the source of life within us and we cannot know a happy and fulfilling life if we do not constantly, actively seek to remain in Him.

**Our happiness, moods, physical condition
and success in life are all connected to
our spiritual state.**

Life Goes On

As I found my contentment and happiness in the Lord and grew closer to Him every day, He began throwing doors open wide in front of me. God placed people in my life who not only showed me what His love truly looks like, but taught me the most wonderful lessons about God. He blessed me with opportunities that I knew were straight from Him and gave me the desires of my heart. God led me to share part of my experience with a few people who were going through tough times of their own, and began to show me that not only did this time in my life benefit me, but it would help others as well.

One day I was reading through journal entries in my notebooks, and the thought popped in my mind, “There’s the book you’ve always wanted to write.” I questioned the Lord about it, and He began showing me Scriptures where He commanded His people to write His words down. I took that as His blessing upon a desire that had been in my heart for a long time and began putting this book together.

Since I’m a singer, I also began work on a recording to correlate to this book. Many of the songs were the anthems of my heart during this experience. They were the songs I sang to myself when I couldn’t sleep at night. They were the lyrics from which I drew strength. As you will read about further, the author of Psalm 77 describes how he remembered his songs in the night. Those melodies and these writings were mine. I held onto them in the darkest times, and I smile upon them from the other side.

May you sing along.

Psalm 77: When Life Hurts



Come on, admit it. When you're hurting, nothing else matters to you. You don't care about people on the news in a far-off country. It's hard to feel sorry for somebody who has a headache when your heart is breaking. Your pain completely usurps your whole existence and happy people really get on your nerves.

When we are hurt, it seems that no problem is as big as ours. Our pain and stress consume every thought. Our minds play a never-ending reel of memories, and we wish we could go back to the good times before it got so hard and we were handling life just fine on our own (so we thought).

When I was sick, lonely and hurting, I remember telling God that I couldn't live that way forever. I knew He was trying to teach me something in the tough times but I had a lot of trouble getting past the point where I constantly thought about the things that were bothering me.

There's a song that says, "Memories light the corners of my mind." One memory can cast light into every dark, recessed corner of our minds, dredging up every hurt that we thought was buried and forgotten. How can we get past the things that have hurt us? In

Psalm 77 there is someone just like you and me who shows us by example how it's done.

Psalm 77:1-2

**“I cried out to God for help, I cried out to God to hear
me. When I was in distress,
I sought the Lord...”**

I've never been much of a crier. I don't like to cry; I avoid it at all costs. If I can't avert it, I at least try to do it in private. However, even though I don't like crying, I've gotten quite good at it and it's been good for me. I have cried out to God, yelled at Him, and vented my frustrations to Him. He didn't seem to mind. He was patient and loving. I think we all can identify with the feelings the psalmist describes. There are times in every person's life when we can do nothing but cry out to God.

The author of this psalm is identified as Asaph. Asaph doesn't specify what is troubling him, but from the way he describes his emotional state, his circumstances must have been traumatic. The psalmist Asaph was a person just like you and me, but his reaction to his distress is exactly right:

When he was in distress, he sought the Lord.

It's difficult to do that sometimes. When we're upset or hurt, it's a lot easier to lash out at everyone in anger. It makes our flesh feel better to whine, complain and extract sympathy from everyone around us. We feel justified in blaming everyone else for our prob-

lems. It seems more productive to try to do everything we can to change the situation.

This is the wrong approach.

Distress should drive us straight to our knees. Heartaches should prompt us to open up God's Word. Hard times can and should bring us closer to the Lord. God will teach us more about Himself and about our lives than we ever imagined possible when we are broken and humble enough to listen. Many times only a hurt of great magnitude is powerful enough to bring us to the end of ourselves. We must empty ourselves to God before He can fill us again.

Psalm 77:3-4

**"I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;
I mused, and my spirit grew faint.
You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak."**

The psalmist is so distraught that he cannot sleep or even speak. He mulled over the things that hurt him, and he felt as if he were dying inside. When was the last time you were there? Are you there now?

Psalm 77:5-9

**"I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused
and my spirit inquired: 'Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?"**

**Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten
to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"**

Here, Asaph unleashes a torrent of desperate questions upon God. He reminisces about how good life used to be and wonders if the reason for his distress is God's rejecting him.

In weak moments I asked God the same questions. I kept thinking about the former things and I kept wishing things could go back to the way they had been.

When we are in pain, it is a typical human reaction to question God. We wonder if God has forgotten all about us. I think sometimes we react as if our life situations must be the direct results of God's "moods," and if we are hurting, God must be angry with us. The world can be so cold at times that we mistakenly think God has withheld His goodness. Sometimes we even despair and think that we will never feel God's love again.

The psalmist dwelt on his memories and his past. He reminisced. He wished things could go back to the way they were. He blamed God for his problems. He grew angry with God, he doubted God and his faith weakened. Do you ever feel that way?

I think it's interesting that although He questioned God, the psalmist didn't turn his back on God and walk away even in the middle of doubt. He took his questions and his doubts straight to the Lord.

Disciplining The Mind

Psalm 77:10-12

“Then I thought, ‘To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.’”

We can learn from the psalmist’s attitude how to best deal with painful memories and move forward. The first word of this passage is significant: *Then*. The person speaking left his feelings behind. After he despaired and questioned God, *then* things began to turn around.

Well what happened... *then*? The psalmist had to make a conscious choice to move forward from his own free will. He took definitive steps of **action**.

He disciplined his mind by committing to doing the following things:

1. He **concentrated** on God’s faithfulness and power. (v. 10-20)
2. He **remembered** the deeds of the Lord over the years. He remembered all of the miracles God had performed. He considered the facts of the situation.

He kept his focus on the Lord.

3. He **meditated** on the Lord's works. (v.12) He reflected on what the Lord had already done for him. (v.12) (KJV) I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings.
4. He **talked** about what the Lord had done. He testified to the goodness of God- even though he didn't feel close to God at the time.

Only three verses back from this passage, verses 7 through 9, the psalmist questioned God's love and God's faithfulness. He asked if God has forgotten him and if God would ever be loving and compassionate to him again. In verses 10 through 12, *then* he made a conscious choice to focus on what God has done for him.

It's a normal reaction to feel all alone when hard times come. Even when we feel far away from God in our hardest times, we can look back at the past at all the times God protected us, guided us, and showed us His love. We can take comfort in knowing that God has been with us in the past and that He is there still, even though we may not feel close to Him.

We have to be willing to take action.

Four Steps Of Action

So how do we get past the things that hurt us? The psalmist took four steps of action in order to move on from his past which are summed up in four verbs:

1. Concentrate.

We have to discipline our minds to think on the good things. Think about who God is, how loving and gracious He is, and remember His awesome power.

2. Focus.

Look back through Scripture and the stories of your own life. See what God has done in the past and remember He is the same God yesterday, today and forever.

3. Meditate.

Train yourself to constantly meditate on the Lord. Fill up your mind with His Word. When we fill up our minds with Scripture, it crowds out other thoughts that only will take us captive.

4. Talk.

Words are very powerful; they can create a positive atmosphere conducive to change for the better, or they can keep us hopelessly mired in negativity and defeat. Purpose to fill your conversation with Scripture and positive talk about what God is doing in your life. Tell those around you that although you're going through a hard time right now, God is working in your life and you're going to come out of this trial a stronger, better Christian!

We have to come to a place where we are willing to take action. We have to ask ourselves, "Do I really want to stay in this place

forever, or do I really want to move on?" When we are fully ready to move on, we have to commit to disciplining our thinking, and we do that with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 12:2

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

I quoted this Scripture to myself almost daily. On a bad day, when I would get down, I would remind myself, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind!” This helped me to keep my focus on the Lord and the positive changes He was making in my life. When you fill your mind up with Scripture, the negative things, the stresses and hurts are not so overwhelming.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Ask God to renew your mind and free you from your hurts, your past and your distress.

God’s Résumé

The rest of Psalm 77 describes some of God’s accomplishments. The psalmist purposely stops talking about himself in order to take the focus off of His problems and remind himself and us of what God can do. The psalmist recounts many displays of God’s power, specifically recalling the way God led the Israelites through the parted Red Sea. I think this retelling is very significant. God had

won so many victories for His people that the psalmist could have focused on, but he chose to remember the Exodus.

Psalm 77:13-14

**“Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles; you display your
power among the peoples. With your mighty arm you
redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.”**

Psalm 77:19-20

**“Your path led through the sea, your way through
the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.
You led your people like a flock by the hand of
Moses and Aaron. “**

Why the Exodus?

It's possible that the psalmist chose to recount this event because of its symbolic representations. The children of Israel were released from bondage in Egypt by the hand of God, and God led them through the Red Sea. They wandered in the wilderness until they were ready to claim the Promised Land. They had to go through what seemed like impossible circumstances to get to the life God had prepared for them.

;The first few times I read this psalm, I wondered to myself why God's path had to lead through the sea. Why does He always seem to do things the hard way?

I think God allows us to come to the edge of the mighty waters specifically so we will realize we can't go through them without Him. There is no hard way for Him. We see problems; He sees opportunities. Our most impossible circumstances are not even inconveniences to Him. It's a human urge to do everything we can to handle things on our own, until life finally gets so difficult that we admit we need help.

Even if we are in completely uncharted waters, God has already been this way before. God has already delivered His people from bondage, and He can deliver you and me. God has already walked through the wilderness with the ones He loves, and asked them to trust Him. God will walk with us through our wilderness, and He may ask us to trust Him in the face of some pretty discouraging circumstances.

But rest assured, God will carry us through. He will lead us through the hardest times of our lives if we trust Him, and He has an extraordinary life waiting for us if we obey Him.

We have to go through the wilderness to get to the Promised Land.

The End? Or The Beginning?

When I first read this psalm, I wondered why the psalmist seemingly just stopped at verse 20, or as we say in the South, he "just up and quit." Wouldn't it have made a better story if he told how God lifted him up out of his doldrums and conquered his situation?

Psalm 77 shows how the psalmist made the choice to dwell on the power of God, not his problems. I love that this psalm ends with

God's resume, because when we have reached the end of ourselves, we have come to the beginning of what He can do.

With God, the end is the beginning.

Plan A To Plan B



Under many Christians' beds lies a big, scary monster. So much attention is given to the sometimes-intimidating, elusive mystery for the Christian:

God's will for your life.

Christians chase after it like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. People write books about how to find it. People buy books and listen to sermons hoping to discover it. Some people wonder if God even has a plan for their lives at all.

This is not about that.

There's another question that bears asking.

What happens when God's will for your life is messed up?

What do you do when the door is slammed shut? Did God's will for your life change? Was that ever really His will in the first place? Is it now impossible for you to live out God's will for your life? Are you going to miss out on God's best for you?

Every person's purpose is different, because God has made each of us unique. But when I asked myself these questions, God showed me some Biblical examples of how man's freewill choices affected the outcome of His original plans. He also taught me that the purposes of His heart endure forever, and even when it seems His plans for us have come to an end, He can give us something even better than what we originally envisioned. Only He can make Plan B better than Plan A.

Jeremiah 29:11

**“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord,
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
to give you hope and a future.”**

1 Samuel 15

(I'm not writing out entire chapters here; read it for yourself!)

God had appointed Saul to be Israel's king, but Saul acted foolishly, moved ahead of God, and disobeyed Him. (v.7-10) He didn't keep God's commandment, so God sought out someone else to replace Saul as king of Israel.

How did Saul displease God?

God instructed Saul to attack the Amalekites, some of Israel's fiercest enemies, and completely destroy everything that belonged to them. Saul attacked them and destroyed most of their belongings as God told him to, but he spared the king of the Amalekites and kept the best of the sheep and livestock for himself. When the prophet Samuel questioned Saul about it, Saul claimed that he had

spared the best of the plunder to sacrifice them to the Lord, although God had told him to totally destroy everything.

Saul honored himself in claiming to have obeyed God. He was rebellious and arrogant for thinking that his decisions would be better than what God had commanded him to do. God was grieved that He had made Saul king, and sent Samuel on a mission to anoint the one God had already chosen to replace Saul: David.

Here's the part I love the most: God told Samuel to stop mourning for Saul, and go find the new king.

I remember when I was a kid and I'd get in trouble for something. I would start crying because I knew I deserved to be punished, and the punishment would be very, very harrowing and tragic, such as being sent to my room or being denied TV privileges. My parents would always insist, "Dry it up!" (Thanks for the empathy, Dad) My tears didn't change the outcome (I always got my punishment); they only delayed what was to come.

Mourning for Saul only leaves us stuck in the past and keeps us from finding David. At some point, the mourning period has to end so that life can go on. In order to move into a new place, we may have to leave some things behind.

Samuel looked in the most unlikely place for the new king- out in the fields. He found a teenage shepherd boy, who didn't look very regal but had the strength of a warrior, the grace of a poet and the heart of a king. The Lord revealed to Samuel that David was the chosen one to replace Saul, and Samuel anointed David as the future king of Israel.

1 Samuel 16

(Don't cheat. Read it yourself!)

During this time, after he had displeased God, Saul was miserable. The Spirit of the Lord departed from him and an evil spirit that God had sent came over him. He fell into deep depression.

As usual in God-orchestrated irony, Saul's servant had met David and had seen him play the harp. The servant commented to Saul how accomplished David was, and recommended that Saul invite David to come play for him, that it would make Saul feel better. (1 Samuel 16:14-22) David entered the palace as an armor-bearer to Saul, and David played the harp for the king every day.

How on earth would someone in the king's palace know about a harp-strumming shepherd boy?!

God made a way into the palace for David, while Saul was on the way out. The Lord tore the kingdom of Israel away from Saul because he displeased God, he did not keep the Lord's commands, and he spoke empty words about God. God gave the kingdom to one far superior- David, who was already in place and who had already been preparing for this time, whether he knew it or not.

Saul's disobedience did not surprise God. The Lord knew a "backup" plan would be necessary, because God gives all human beings a free will and allows us to use it. We can accept God's will for our lives or we can reject it. There are consequences and results for both courses of action. But do our choices limit God?

No. His plan will be accomplished whether we choose to have a part in it or not. God always has a Plan B, and it can be even better than Plan A.

God's plan will be accomplished whether we choose to be part of it or not.

Still not convinced? Ok, here's another example.

Genesis 24- Isaac and Rebekah

Everybody focuses on Rebekah and Isaac in this story and how they got together, as if they did it all by themselves without any help. I did too, until I noticed this little gem tucked away at the beginning.

Abraham decided it was time for his son, Isaac to get married. (Makes me wonder how Isaac felt about his dad's decision!) Abraham sent his servant to find Isaac a wife according to the oath God swore to Abraham. The servant asked Abraham what would happen if the woman God revealed to him would not obey and come back with him. Abraham replied that the servant would be released from the oath and would not be bound to it.

Ok, so today we don't pick our mates according to oaths (although that may not be such a bad idea) and we don't enlist other people to make our life-altering decisions (at least most of the time). What's the point?

God doesn't hold us in bondage for others' freewill choices. If other people are involved in God's plan for our lives, and they reject His purpose, He will release us from that situation and prepare something better for us.

Daniel 5:20- The Writing On The Wall

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was the most powerful ruler on earth. Nebuchadnezzar worshiped pagan gods, but he recognized the power of the one true God. He brought in four Hebrew boys, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to serve in the king's palace.

(Aren't those names crazy? Makes you wonder why people in the Bible didn't have names like Bill, Sam, Joe and Larry)

But even with their funny names, God had plans for them, and made a way into the king's palace for them.

During this time the king realized that the Lord was with Daniel, and Daniel interpreted many dreams for Nebuchadnezzar, most of which were rebukes against the king and prophecies about the future.

The Lord's warnings fell on deaf ears. Nebuchadnezzar grew arrogant, proud and confident in his own strength, so God deposed him and stripped him of the throne, handing it over to his son.

Daniel 5:26

Beltshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son, succeeded him as king, and turned out to be like his father: proud, arrogant and seeing no need for God. One night during a party, God gave Beltshazzar an unmistakable sign: the writing on the wall.

Mene Mene Tekel Parsin

These were mathematical, financial terms used in everyday Babylonian life, for they referred to Babylonian money. However, the full implications of this message were completely lost on Beltshazzar, who was too drunk to understand the message. Beltshazzar called Daniel in to explain this writing to him, and Daniel delivered a death sentence to the king. Daniel and God got Beltshazzar's attention by revealing that the king's idol, money, would be his undoing.

Mene: God has *numbered* the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been *weighed* in the balance and found wanting (lacking).

Parsin: Your kingdom will be *divided* and given to the Medes and Persians.

(I always thought it interesting that God wrote *Mene* twice. Maybe He wanted to emphasize to Beltshazzar that power came only from God and not from his own strength.)

That very night Beltshazzar was killed and the kingdom was handed over to Darius the Mede. While not a believer, Darius respected the reputation of the God of Israel. He also was the uncle of Cyrus, who was prophesied to be God's anointed to rebuild the temple and free the Jews from captivity. Cyrus is a prototype of Christ, who redeemed his people and set them free from bondage.

Cyrus eventually freed the Israelites from exile and allowed them to return to their homeland. In order for Darius and Cyrus to carry out God's will, God had to first remove Nebuchadnezzar and Beltshazzar. God made a way for Daniel into the palace to remove the Babylonian kings. God then made a way for Cyrus into the palace so that His people could be freed from tyranny. God made a way for a Savior so all humankind could be free from sin.

God is always at work.

When we are mourning for Saul, He is preparing David.

When we are affected by someone else's choice, He will not hold us in bondage for it.

When we do not understand the writing on the wall, He is making a way into the palace.

Get Up, Pick Up, and Walk



“Well, she’s always had it easy. I don’t see why I have to go through this and she doesn’t.”

“I don’t get why God makes me live like this.”

“I hate this, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“It’s just SO HARD!!”

I hear people say these things all the time. We know intellectually and instinctively that life isn’t fair, and yet we don’t understand when bad things happen. It happens to other people, but not to us! We’re good people- we don’t deserve it like *they* do.

Life deals us situations we don’t like. We cry and ask God to deliver us from everything unpleasant. Should we ask God for help? Of course. There are situations in life that only God can handle, and He wants us to acknowledge that we need His help. We have to come to the end of ourselves and humble ourselves enough to realize that we are nothing without His power. But when we come to the place where we are ready and God is ready to do a great work in us and turn our circumstances around, God expects us to take action. Does He need our help? No. But we will learn much more and be stronger Christians when we make the conscious choice to commit to taking the necessary steps in following His will.

John 5- A Magnet For Misery

Everybody likes pool parties, right?

The pool at Bethesda was a busy place. The reputation of the Bethesda pool was that an angel would come by and stir the waters, and when the water was stirred, those who entered the pool would be healed of their physical ailments. This probably made the pool a very popular hangout.

The pool was also a magnet for misery.

People of many backgrounds and with various diseases hung out by the pool, waiting for the water to be stirred. Some of them spent years congregating by the pool, and most likely many of them knew each other very well. Undoubtedly, some of them were very sincere and in need of healing. But I suspect that as is so common in life, the pool also attracted people who made excuses, enjoyed their misery and blamed others for their misfortune, refusing any responsibility in their situations.

One of the pool's "regulars" was a crippled man who had been lying by the pool for 38 years, waiting for someone to take pity on him and help him into the pool. He most likely knew many people there at the pool, and they all probably fed off of each other's misery, trapping each other in a downward cycle of self-pity and defeat. He had assumed the role of a helpless victim who was powerless to do anything positive with his life. He saw no way out of his situation and could do nothing to help himself.

One day Someone arrived to help him, but help did not come in the form that this man assumed it would.

Rather than pick him up and carry him into the pool, Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well! Now, if it were anybody else, that

could be considered a dumb question- after all, who would lie by a pool for 38 years hoping to be healed if he didn't really want to get well?

But this man understood deep down what Jesus was really asking.

It would have been easy for Jesus to simply say, "Be healed." But as always, Jesus addressed the deeper issues in this man's life. Jesus asked if he really wanted to get well, or if he wanted to hold onto his excuses. Jesus asked if he was content to live below his potential, or if he wanted to fully experience all that God had for him. Jesus gave him a choice.

God always gives us a choice. We can allow him to transform our lives or we can choose to hang onto the old, self-defeating ways in which we've always lived.

But Jesus didn't promise to make everything easy for the crippled man. Jesus told him that something would be required of him in order to be healed. He said, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk."

I can just imagine the shocked expression on the man's face and the thought running through his mind: "You want me to do WHAT?"

A seemingly impossible task for a crippled man? Not with God next to him.

God likes verbs: Get up, pick up and walk. He honors faith accompanied by action. James 2:17 tells us, "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Jesus knew that the man was crippled. He was well aware of his challenges in life. He wasn't being cruel by telling him to get up and walk when the man obviously couldn't on his own.

Jesus was showing this man that in order for his life to change, he had to be willing to take action. He had to give up his excuses and make a commitment. He had to be willing to take the necessary steps and hold to God's hand with every step. He had to dare to trust God enough to do what He asked.

No More Pool Parties

The other people at the pool watching all of this probably didn't understand what was taking place. They probably whispered to each other behind their friend's back, "Who does he think he is? Why does he get healed and we don't? How does he think he's going to have anything better than this? He must think he's better than we are."

Jesus asked the crippled man to leave behind life as he knew it. He asked him to change his whole way of thinking and his social circle. He challenged him to leave behind everything that was holding him in bondage and defeat.

It's possible that He also wanted to show the other people by the pool what could be theirs if they had faith enough to believe in Him and obey His commands. Jesus extends an open invitation to all who will believe.

Get up.

Lift up your eyes to God. Ask him for His help.

Pick up.

Make the decision to follow what God tells you to do. It's not enough to merely lie by the pool, be miserable and expect life to suddenly get better. We have to want to do whatever it takes to follow

the Lord and be willing to follow through on all of His requirements.

We need to look inside and ask ourselves these questions:

Do I want to get well?

Do I want to get over the things in my past that have hurt me?

Do I want to live a life transformed?

Or do I want to stay the way I've always been? Do I want to live in misery and defeat?

The Scripture shows us that we have to decide. We have to make a choice. We have to determine what we want and ask God for help with the confidence that He will do what He says He will do.

Walk.

Leave behind all that is holding you down. Walk away from the places in your life where you know God doesn't want you to be. Get away from the people who don't understand what God is doing in you and who attempt to discourage you.

Run to Jesus. Embrace all that He has in store for you.

There is a better life waiting, if you'll just leave the pool party.

Philippians: It's A Jungle Out There



The world can be a scary, lonely place for a Christian who genuinely wants to follow the Lord. When we follow the Lord, obstacles will definitely be in our path. We will meet with many hurts, disappointments and frustrations. The apostle Paul knew what that was like probably better than anyone. He experienced persecution from religious leaders, prosecution by the government and betrayal by his closest friends. Yet he kept his focus on the Lord and left us a map to navigate this jungle of life the way a Christian should.

The Church of Philippi

In the epistle of Philippians, Paul is writing to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,” exhorting the Philippians to stay strong in the faith. He warns them about obstacles they may face as they try to serve the Lord. He also describes his life experiences and uses them to answer some potential questions the Philippians may have about life and faith.

Philippians is a book of encouragement. It also is a book of answers for those who are struggling in their circumstances. It shares the secret of how to turn battles into victories.

You and I could easily be members of the Church at Philippi. What might the apostle Paul say to us today? As we study Philippians, take Paul's words to heart as a personal letter to you.

Philippians 1:1-11

Paul writes to the Philippians that he is confident that God will complete the work He has begun in them as one of the first Christian churches. He explains that this confidence is the right attitude to take whether circumstances seem good or bad, because they share in God's grace along with him. God's grace was available to the apostle Paul and the Philippians alike.

Life Lesson: Faith does not depend on feelings. We can be confident in what God says to us and what He has promised us because His grace is freely offered to all who believe. His grace is sufficient for every circumstance.

Paul prays that their love would increase through knowledge and depth of insight. He prays that they would have discernment and righteousness.

God is the ultimate source of all things good and pure and holy. Discernment, righteousness, depth of insight and love all ultimately stem from His infinite resources. Discernment and righteousness come from love, which comes from knowledge and depth of insight about God.

When we learn more about God by diligently studying His Word, He deepens our insight into the things of God as well as the things of this world. Love comes from deepened insight and increased knowledge. When we apply ourselves to the study of God's Word and allow it to permeate our lives, we will begin to demonstrate God's love in our everyday actions.

Love and righteousness come through Jesus Christ.

Life Lesson: Anyone can behave well for a time, but a true transformation of the heart can only come from allowing Christ to change your life. We cannot truly love each other from the heart apart from Jesus Christ. We can try to look good on our own, but we cannot be righteous apart from Christ.

Paul's Chains- Our Chains

Philippians 1:12-14

Paul shares that his experiences and his testimony of being in chains as a prisoner has served to advance the gospel. His hardships have emboldened others to speak more forcefully and convincingly for Christ. Those who heard and believed as a result benefited from Paul's difficult circumstances. Paul's heart in the middle of his trials revealed Christ to those with whom he was in contact.

Life Lesson: Paul was a human being just like you and I. He experienced things in his life that were difficult to handle. He was literally in chains for the gospel.

You and I most likely have been bound in “chains” of different kinds at different times in our lives. Whatever our chains are, be they rejection, disappointment, anger, depression, physical sickness, poverty, or any other type of tragedy, our “chains” can be used to advance the gospel just like Paul’s.

Philippians 1:15-18

Some took advantage of Paul’s hardships and tried to outdo him and compete with him. They tried to make themselves look good at his expense. Some were sincerely inspired by Paul’s experience, but even those who treated him wrongly knew that God was with Paul and they were jealous of the anointing on his life.

Amazingly, Paul did not get upset. He stated that he rejoiced that no matter the motive behind it, Christ was preached. His ultimate desire was for the advancement of the gospel, whatever the cost was to him.

Some people will be threatened when we begin to accomplish great things for the kingdom of God. Many times what the Lord is doing in our lives can serve as a reminder to others that maybe they aren’t doing all they can for the Lord, and some will try to discourage us, attack us and hinder us.

It can be very difficult to understand when people who profess to be Christians don’t always behave as Christ would have them behave, and we all fall into this category at one time or another.

Life Lesson: I’d say most of us fall short of Paul’s seemingly super-human standard here. When we are wrongly treated by those who profess to be Christians, the typical response is hurt and anger. If

these emotions are not brought to the Lord and dealt with, they can fester and become bitterness and resentment, which are not God-honoring. God understands our human dilemma. I believe that's one reason Paul went through these difficult times: God would use them to teach the rest of us how to respond to pain.

So what should we do when we come up against opposition? Paul shows us.

Philippians 1:19-26

Paul clung to his hope. He was willing to endure the hardships so that others could learn from them.

Philippians 1:27-30

Paul tells the Philippians that they should stand firm in the Spirit and not be afraid. He explains that if they do not waver in their faith and do not live according to fear, their confidence in God will be a sign to those who persecute them that those people will be destroyed. He also promised the Philippians that God would honor their righteousness and deliver them from persecution. In verse 30 Paul uses himself as an example and explains to the Philippians that he is going through the same things they are.

We can rejoice that Christ is preached whatever the motives. In the face of opposition we can praise the Lord that He is still at work. We must also ask God to help us stay humble and not waver in our faith.

Philippians 2: It's All In The Attitude

Paul discloses the secret to emerging from battle victorious. He reveals to the Philippians how one can turn the greatest tragedies into the greatest testimonies, and He uses the best example of all: Jesus.

Philippians 2:1-11

Paul explains to the Philippians that if they truly desire to follow Christ, they should imitate Jesus in the hardest time of His life, when He was going to the cross. He gives them some essential components to surviving difficult times and growing spiritually based on the attitude of Jesus:

1. Obedience

Jesus was obedient to His Father's will, even to the point of denying Himself and sacrificing His own life.

2. Submission

Jesus lowered Himself to become sin for man on the cross. He took the very nature of a servant, quite a departure for a King.

3. Humility

Constant obedience and submission teaches us that life is not all about us. Jesus was, in nature, God, yet He did not behave as if He were better than everyone else, with a holier-than-thou attitude. Nor did He demand that everyone listen to Him, bow down and worship

Him. He accepted the role of a human being, and He made Himself nothing.

Life Lesson: In order for us to come through our trials victoriously, we must learn from Jesus what the correct attitude is. We must come to the end of ourselves and our own intellect and power. We must submit ourselves to God and obey Him consistently. This submission teaches us that our power is not enough to endure trials, and that we must humble ourselves before the Lord to receive His help.

Philippians 2:12-18

Paul says to live life humbly, and do not let your pride stand between you and God (v. 12). He also brings this spiritual precept to an earthly resolution by saying that the Philippians (and we who study this book) should do everything without complaining or arguing, that they would shine as stars to the world around them. Doing everything without complaining or arguing would require that not only can we not let our pride stand between us and God, but we cannot let pride stand between us and those around us.

(Try to go one day doing *everything* without complaining or arguing *at all*. You'll see really quickly just how much we need God's help!)

Paul consistently shows that whatever takes place on the inside will also show in our behavior which is visible to the world.

Having a good attitude quickly sets you apart from the pack.

Philippians 2:19-30

Paul describes two of God's messengers which will be sent to encourage the people. These men are unique because they genuinely care for the people and are not in it for selfish motives.

Life Lesson: If we are diligent and faithful, God will find a way to encourage us right where we are. God places people in our path for specific reasons and specific seasons.

Philippians 3: Looking Straight Ahead

Philippians 3:1-11

Paul warns the people against being impressed or enticed by people who look good and righteous on the outside but harbor evil in their hearts. These people Paul warns about are likely the ones he describes in chapter 1, verses 15-18, the ones who preached Christ from selfish motives and took advantage of his hardships.

Philippians 3:12-21

Paul was perhaps the greatest apostle and maybe even the greatest Christian who ever lived, but he did not consider himself to have achieved anything. He constantly strived to learn more and be more like Jesus. He says that this attitude is a by-product of increasing spiritual maturity (v. 15).

He explains to the Philippians how the unrighteous live purely for the world around them, but those who are righteous live for the world to come.

Life Lesson: As we grow up more in the Lord and become closer to God, we will start to see a change in our own lives, and those around us should start to see changes in our attitudes. It is a sign of increasing spiritual maturity to not take a holier-than-thou attitude, but to constantly strive to learn more about God and draw closer to Him. The changes on the inside will begin to appear outwardly.

Matthew 12:34

**“For out of the overflow of the heart
the mouth speaks.”**

Philippians 4: A Prescription For Peace

Philippians 4:1-8

Paul tells them ultimately to not be anxious about their problems or difficult circumstances, but to present their requests to God. He tells them to train their minds to think Godly thoughts, and teaches that these are the keys to having peace.

Philippians 4:10-23

Paul says that he does not rely solely on the care and love of his friends but the strength of Christ; however, the Philippians' love is an added bonus which comes at an appropriate time.

It is indeed a jungle out there sometimes. Sometimes even those who profess to love God do not show love toward us. We will inevitably have to deal with setbacks and obstacles as we serve the Lord. It can be very easy to become confused, discouraged and hurt.

But when life seems its worst, you are frustrated and lonely and it'd be a lot easier to just give up.....

Talk to God about what's on your mind and in your heart. Concentrate on the Lord, and the peace of God will guard your heart and mind. God will bring you encouragement when you need it. He will be next to you even when you're in chains for the gospel. Remember, we are living for more than just the world around us; we are living for the world to come. Life is more than today's experience; God can influence and change eternity through you.

The Heart of Jesus: The Heart of A Godly Man



All the single ladies, listen up!
I meet many single women across the country who are asking the same questions:

“Where are all the saved single men?”

“Why can’t I find a man who really is what he seems to be?”

“How will I know when I find The One?”

Choosing a mate is not easy. (I hear an amen!) Allowing God to bring the right man into your life in His perfect time can be scary and frustrating. It’s important for us to know what the picture of a Godly man looks like, so that when we are greeted with the exact representation of God’s love to us, we will recognize him for what he is. At the time of this writing, I’m still single and I’ve asked God all the questions. He showed me in John 17 what the heart of a godly man looks like through the best example of all, Jesus.

Love requires sacrifice.

1 John 3:16

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

What does it mean to give Himself up for us? Christ is the example of what love looks like. His characteristics and His heart are what the heart of a Godly man should encompass. The best example of Jesus' heart is shown in the garden of Gethsemane, depicted in John 17. In Gethsemane, he was preparing to lay down His life, to give himself up. Dr. Brenda Robinson's "Time In The Garden" Bible study brought out some important points for me. Dr. Robinson details how Jesus' heart showed three things:

1. His Purpose

2. His Position

3. His Passion

1. Jesus knew His purpose was to lay down His life so that we could be one with God. He did not back out of His responsibility. He knew what He had to do to accomplish His purpose and He was willing.

**A Godly Man knows his purpose and does not
shirk responsibility.**

John 17:1

“.....He looked toward heaven and prayed.”

Jesus approached God and His purpose with confidence. He knew that God would lift Him up to His rightful place.

**A Godly Man will be confident in the Lord, that God
will lift him up to the place He has called him to.**

Dr. Robinson points out that Jesus' only dread about Calvary was being separated from God. He desired intimacy with God. But when He prayed, He prayed that those He loved would also be intimate with God. He was willing to put Himself aside so that the ones He loved would be able to be one with God.

**A Godly Man desires intimacy with God and with
the one he loves, and desires that the one he loves
is also intimate with God and with himself.
He is willing to sacrifice so that the one he loves
can be one with God.**

These three things are based upon Jesus' willingness to do God's will, His desire to show His love, and His commitment to do whatever it took to be one with God and His own.

John 17:4

**“I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work
You gave me to do...”**

Like Jesus, A Godly Man follows through.

John 17:6

**“I have revealed You to those
whom You gave me.”**

**A Godly Man recognizes the blessings of God and
will show God to the one he loves.**

John 17:8

**“They knew with certainty
that I came from You and
they believed that You sent me.”**

When God brings His choice for you into your life, you will be able to recognize that he is a gift from God by the attributes of God he possesses.

Matthew 7:16

“By their fruit you will recognize them.”

Galatians 5:22

**“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,
peace, patience, kindness,**

**goodness, faithfulness, gentleness
and self-control.”**

**A Godly Man will display these fruits so that you will
know he is from God.**

A man sent from the Lord will display outwardly the fruits of the Spirit. He will be consistent in his walk with Christ. Not only are the fruits of the Spirit attributes of God, but God also has a few other characteristics which we must not overlook.

Matthew 26:42

**“My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken
away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”**

Jesus was willing to go through the anguish of the garden of Gethsemane to strengthen Himself and His own. His love for His Father and for His own would not allow him to run away from the hardest trial of His life.

**A Godly Man will not run from adversity but ask God
for strength to face trials.**

John 17:17

“Sanctify them by the truth.”

In this verse, Jesus prayed that His own would be true and faithful, just as a man of God also will desire one who is true and faithful, and will go the distance to be true and faithful himself.

The man God has for you will be God's love displayed on earth toward you. He will share the heart of Jesus. He will be sensitive to the Lord's leading and will lead you as the two of you grow together in the Lord. Don't settle for anything less than the very best- a man with the heart of Jesus.

1. Time In The Garden. Robinson, Dr. Brenda. 2007. Used by permission.

The Spirit, Water and Blood

(For Those Who Want To Be Grocery Store Freaks)



How do you know that what you're feeling inside is *really* the Holy Spirit's leading?

How can you be sure you've heard God correctly?

Should we follow our heads, our hearts or both?

Are you noticing that I start a lot of these essays with questions?

This whole experience started with questions. These were questions I had for God. Didn't seem to bother Him, so I kept asking.

I used to look at people who were very "spiritual" (at least from my perspective) with awe and was honestly quite intimidated by those who seemed to have an informal, friendly relationship with God like He was their next-door neighbor. You know, the ones who hear God speak as clearly as a television journalist delivers the news. I used to think to myself, "Well, [she's] just a spiritual giant. There is no way I could ever be like that."

I'm going to tell you a secret. This is just between us, okay?

(Those people that go around saying stuff like, "I was in line at the grocery store the other day, and God told me as I was paying

for milk that I should witness to the bag boy"? I thought they were *freaks*.)

This skepticism on my part was purely because I doubted my ability to hear God for myself for a long time. I knew I was saved and could go to God about anything, but I didn't think I was "spiritual" enough (whatever I thought that was) to accurately discern God's will.

God gently and patiently taught me that it doesn't take some magic formula or "sixth sense" to be able to hear His voice. He doesn't make it unnecessarily difficult for us to know His will; rather, He attempts to get our attention in so many ways that we miss far too often. God showed me through a particular passage of Scripture that when the Holy Spirit reveals something to our hearts, He very often confirms that spiritual grain of truth by it "agreeing" with things in the natural, physical realm of life. God uses things we can see to teach us about the things we can't.

1 John 5:6-7

"This is the one who came by water and blood- Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth."

The book of Hebrews was written as a letter to the Jews from the Apostle Paul. Paul was trying to help the Jews understand that salvation is found in Jesus Christ, not in the religious rituals upon which they had come to rely. If you study Hebrews, you will see that Paul illustrated his point by showing that Old Testament concepts

have New Testament parallels. For example, the Jewish offerings of bulls and goats were ordained by God to be the sacrifice for the remission of sin. In the New Testament, Jesus abolished the Jewish sacrifice for sin by becoming sin Himself on the cross. In the Old Testament, salvation was only for the Jews. In the New Testament, through Christ, the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, and salvation was available to the whole world. Every Old Testament/Jewish idea has a New Testament/Gentile parallel. The Jewish rituals are outwardly visible in the physical, whereas the Christian (Gentile) concepts are spiritual and take place inwardly.

In the Old Testament, water symbolized purification or cleansing. Jewish people purified themselves by way of a mikvah bath, and in this way became “clean” from their sins. In the New Testament, the outward symbol for purification from sin became baptism. Water baptism is the Christian symbol of the cleansing from sin that takes place inwardly when we receive Christ as Savior.

Hebrews 9:12 teaches us that Jesus did not rely on the Jewish sacrifice of bulls and goats for sin, because He was sinless. He required no sacrifice for His own benefit. Rather, His entire existence was to be the perfect sacrifice for the rest of the world. It was the shedding of His own blood that removed sin from those who believed in Him.

So according to the Scripture we just read, 1 John 5:6-7, Jesus Christ came by both water and blood. Both Jewish and Christian tenets of faith were part of Jesus’s life. Jesus was raised as a Jew and studied Jewish law, yet His life, death and resurrection made it possible for those who were not Jewish to be saved by grace through faith, by the shedding of His blood.

(Jesus was not a Christian? Christians don't "own" Jesus? Nope. I know; I was surprised too.)

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Jesus' blood was the ultimate sacrifice for sin. He was clean on the outside and clean on the inside.

In other words, Jesus was not holy because of man's rituals, but He was holy in both the Jewish view and the Gentile view. He covered all the bases. He was acceptable for all. He came by both water and blood.

Human exercises, philosophies and ideas alone are not enough to cleanse us from our past, our hurts and our sin. We must combine our God-given capacities, our faith and our action with the power of God in our lives. We must come by water and blood.

But how can that happen?

The agent that ties it all together is the Holy Spirit.

You're probably thinking, "So what does this have to do with how I hear God?" Stay with me here.

(v.7)

"For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. "

Water and blood are both tangible substances and spiritual symbols. They are both agents of cleansing, as we discussed earlier. The Jews believed the water of the mikvah bath cleansed them. Christians believe the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin. The three, the Spirit, water, and blood are in agreement because truth is shown by the Spirit and physical evidence. They agree because Jesus covered all the bases.

(v.6)

**“...it is the Spirit who testifies, because
the Spirit is the truth. “**

The Spirit testifies to the work of Christ in our lives. The Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ's accomplishment on the cross, and bears witness to our faith in action. When God speaks to us, he delivers a message to us that we hear with our spiritual ears. Because the Spirit, water and blood agree, God can also use physical evidence to reinforce and confirm what He has spoken to us.

The physical elements (water and blood) and spiritual (the Holy Spirit) all testify together in agreement to the truth. The Spirit will confirm physical evidence to the truth.

Romans 3:21:

**“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law,
has been made known, to which the Law and the
Prophets testify. “**

Even though the righteousness which has been made known is apart from the written law, the Law itself and the Prophets of the Law testify to it, because the Spirit testifies to the truth, and the three agree: the Spirit, the water and the blood.

So what does this all mean?

God doesn't want you to feel like you have to guess at His will. When He speaks a word to you, He can ordain your circumstances to point you where you should go. When He makes the truth known to you, the “real” things around you can teach you about the things that don't seem as real. The world around us has been created by

God, and He will use the things in it to whisper to you, shout at you, and make you more aware of His love.

The first time I fully understood God's will in a particular situation, I knew that I wanted to share that moment with somebody else. I wanted other people to know what confidence it gave me in my spiritual life to be able to understand what God was saying to me. I remember excitedly thinking to myself, "*I can* hear God for myself and get it right!"

And that's when I became one of those grocery store freaks.

The Fulfillment of Faith



I know what it's like to pray and wait for something for a long time without seeing any results. It's easy to get discouraged. It's usually not long until we start thinking there is something wrong with us or our prayers and that's why God isn't listening to them. Maybe we aren't asking Him for the right things. Maybe we aren't asking for the right reasons. Maybe we're just doing this all wrong and that's why we don't seem to be getting anywhere.

Many times we hear people say that our questions may never be answered here in this life, or that everything we've been praying for may not fully realize until we get to heaven, and I believe in some cases that's true. However, during a time when I was very discouraged, the Lord reminded me that He doesn't always wait for us to get to heaven before He lets us see the thing for which we've been praying. Sometimes He answers our questions and fulfills our dreams right before our earthly eyes.

**Sometimes God answers our prayers
before our very eyes.**

Luke 23:47-The Centurion At The Crucifixion (Again, read it for yourself!)

This Scripture describes a Roman centurion standing by as Jesus dies on the cross. He participated in the crucifixion and stood guard to ensure that everything happened just as it was supposed to. That would make him an enemy of Jesus, right? Wrong. The Scripture says that he praised God as he watched Jesus die, saying that Jesus was righteous.

Rome was a pantheistic empire; it was their culture to worship many mythological gods of nature. However, to acknowledge any other Supreme Being or king than Caesar was grounds for treason, punishable by death. So why would a Roman officer, a subordinate of the state, risk his life and his position by worshiping God? How did he know and why would he say that Jesus was righteous?

(Pay close attention here; this gets good!) This Scripture text is the first appearance of the centurion at the crucifixion scene, yet the Scripture refers to him as if he is not a new character, merely referring to him as “the centurion.” It does not explain his identity further. Because the Scripture so familiarly refers to him....

....could it be possible that he is the same centurion as in Luke 7, whose servant Jesus healed?

Luke 7:1-10- The Faith of the Centurion

The centurion of Luke 7 was renowned among the Jews because he loved Israel and helped build the synagogue. He had most likely studied Jewish law and spent time around Jewish people.

The Dress From God



It was the hardest time of my life. It seemed as if everything had come crashing down upon my shoulders all at once. I had been so discouraged, exhausted and frustrated for so long and I felt disconnected from everything around me. In the days before my vacation I felt I would literally die from stress and all I wanted was a week of rest and peace. I left for vacation on Monday, August 11 and met my friend Keena at a beachside condo in Panama City, Florida.

On Thursday of the vacation we decided to go to a movie. During the movie I got a text message from my dad, saying that I needed to call them. When we got out of the movie I called them, and they told me they had found my black dress at Bloomingdale's in Orlando.

Back in April I had found a gorgeous black evening dress at Bloomingdale's in Atlanta. It was expensive, so I didn't buy it. I thought about the dress all summer and scoured endless websites looking for it online to no avail. I even called Bloomingdale's in Atlanta and they said they didn't have the dress anymore.

So imagine my surprise when I called Mom and Dad back. Bloomingdale's in Orlando had my size, and it was HALF PRICE! They bought the dress, and Keena and I went to our massage appointments that we had booked. I was SO excited about my dress.

As I lay on the massage table, all I could think about was wearing that dress on stage and what a great surprise it was. For once, *something* had finally gone right for me.

In the midst of these thoughts, the Lord whispered to me, "This dress is from Me."

Huh?!

He said, "See? I haven't forgotten you! I know what a hard time you've been having. I am giving you this dress because I love you and I want to bless you. Your mom won't ask you to pay her back, either, because I, not she, am the One who is giving it to you." (The massage therapist probably I had either lost my mind or was in extreme pain since I was lying there with tears streaming down my face.)

I got home Sunday night, and was presented with a plastic hanging bag from Bloomingdale's. I hugged my mom and said, "Give me the receipt so I'll know how much to write you a check for." She said, "Oh, you don't have to pay me back. It's a gift."

And it is. Not only is the dress a gift, but what it represents is an even greater gift. Every time I wear that dress, I remember that God sees every second of our pain, heartache, sickness and disappointment, and He cares about it all. He cares about the things we care about, no matter how small and frivolous they seem, and He uses them to speak to us and remind us of His love.

I guess one's burning bush is another's black dress.

I walked into Bloomingdale's in Atlanta three days later, where I had originally seen the dress, and where I called, to be told they didn't have it anymore.

There it was on the mannequin, in my size. They had it all along.

Don't you ever let anyone tell you that God doesn't care.

The Reason



What's it all about?
What is the reason for this?

“Why, Lord, WHY?”

It seems we cannot help but ask these questions, as if we can't bear the thought that our suffering might be for nothing. We have to have a reason for it in order to deal with the pain. Possibly we are willing to sacrifice ourselves and our peace of mind for a higher purpose, but not for a reason we deem insignificant.

When I was sick and dealing with more pain and loneliness than I had ever known, I searched the Scriptures very diligently for any possible explanation. Each time I prayed I asked God what His purpose for me in all of this was. I read that all things work together for good for them that love the Lord, but I wanted God to be just a little more specific. Exactly *what* good was coming from being miserable and *how* was it going to happen? The reassurance in Scripture that even tough times work together with the good times for our benefit seemed hard to believe, but I had to believe it. I had to believe it so that I would not give up. I had to believe in order to not live in defeat. I had to believe because He told me to trust Him. So I did.

I've been on the other side of that particular storm in my life for a while now, and I believe God has shown me the reason for it. God always has a reason, though it usually doesn't make much sense to us at the time. Most often the purpose for our suffering is revealed to us after the suffering subsides. For someone like me, who likes to know everything that's going to happen before it happens, that's incredibly frustrating.

But God showed me the answer in the first chapter of Second Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 1:3-6

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance for the same sufferings we suffer."

Our suffering is for others.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that if he and Timothy were distressed, it was for them. If he and Timothy were comforted, that was also for them. Whatever the circumstances were, they endured

them for the sake of others, that the Corinthians might learn and benefit from them.

God brings us through trials so that we can share our experience with others. He allows the sufferings of Christ to flow over into our lives so that when we receive comfort from Him, our comfort may also overflow into the lives of those around us. We are expected to give to others when we receive from the Lord. We have a responsibility to allow others to benefit from our experiences.

But why do we have to go through something so difficult? Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just be nicer to people and pray for them?

It probably would. But it wouldn't change us. Besides, God never takes the easy way out. And He doesn't allow us to do it either.

Most people live their lives from the mindset of "Whataboutmewhataboutmewhataboutme- WHAT ABOUT ME?" From each of our perspectives, we are the leading man/woman in the movie of life. We have been cast in the starring role, and everyone else is a supporting character.

But the movie isn't about us. It's about God.

I believe that God uses our trials to help us understand that life isn't all about us. There is something bigger than us, something more important than us. In our sinful natures, our human hearts don't care much about the world around us. Without the Lord's grace, we are too self-centered to help others. When life is great, it's easy to begin thinking we have this all under control on our own, we're a pretty big deal, and the world sure is lucky to have us around. When something comes along that is too big for us to handle, that is God's wake-up call to us that we are not directing the movie.

2 Corinthians 1:8-9

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure to endure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

Paul is not hiding his troubles from the Corinthians. He is baring his soul to them. He shares that even he, one of the greatest servants of God in history, despaired. He could not endure the trials he faced. In sharing his experience with them he helps them understand that God was teaching him not to rely on his own strength, but on Him.

And God is calling us to the same. He is calling us to comfort those in trouble with the comfort we have received. That's what this book has been about. That's what the music is all about. That's the higher purpose that makes our troubles worth the pain.

If you do not learn from your experience, it will benefit no one. If you do not share your comfort with others, you will miss out on the fulfillment that comes from blessing others, and other people will miss out on possibly learning life-changing truths. As the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so our comfort flows over into the lives of others. As the blessings of God flow over into our lives, so should our joy, peace and deepened love for the Lord and others flow over into the lives of those around us.

But it's a scary thing to allow a stranger into the deepest places of your heart. Knowing I would be sharing very personal experi-

ences in these pages intimidated me and at times made me want to delete all my computer files and forget the whole idea. There are times when God asks us to do something that scares us to death.

But just like I had to believe that a greater purpose for my struggles existed, I knew God was calling me to share my story, and I *had* to follow Him. The vision He gave me was more compelling than my fear. The passion I have in my heart for Him drowned out the doubts that whispered, “Are you sure you can do this?” and “Do you really think anybody’s going to care?”

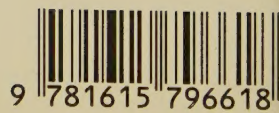
I’m amazed at people who think being a Christian is boring. Oh, it’s not always fun, but *never* boring. Life with Jesus is a thrill ride, scary and exciting all at once. When He said He came that we might have life more abundantly, He wasn’t kidding. God continually challenges us and pushes us out of our comfort zone. He will call us to do things we would never dream of attempting. He will lead us to the wildest places, where we would have never imagined going.

So if you are where I was, wait. Watch. Listen. Learn. Follow Him.

And you will have your own story to tell.

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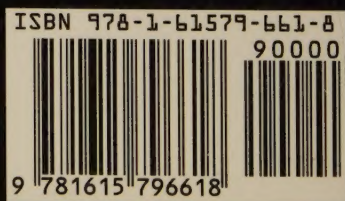
songs in the night
lauren^talley



Songs In The Night is a journey of faith. Lauren Talley's first book reveals her personal struggles and describes how they can become triumphs. It gives Scriptural guidance and encouragement for dealing with distress and discouragement. It teaches you how to turn trials into victories. It asks you to make a commitment to growing spiritually and changing your life with God.

It's more than a book. It's a journey, and you're invited.

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